Improving the Effectiveness of Indicator Reporting: The BC Coast and Marine Environment Project

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A central issue for those working on state of environment (SOE) reporting is how to improve the effectiveness of reporting so that it contributes to informed decisions and positive action. This paper describes recent efforts by the SOE Reporting Unit of the BC Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection to improve the impact of it's reports.

An evaluation of the ministry's *Environmental Trends in BC:2000* report found that two years later (2002), about 15% of respondents still knew about it and used it frequently. Over 50% continued to use it, but not frequently, while 25% never used it or didn't remember receiving it. The most popular function for the report was as an educational tool and for reference; it was also used for 'personal interest'. At that time 61% of respondents used the hard copy, while only 33% used the electronic version (58% had visited website). The most frequently requested improvements were: more background information; a greater variety of indicators and measures; more information on what individuals can do.

An internal paper on SOE reporting (Gilkeson 2003), that included an evaluation of reporting in other provincial and international jurisdictions, recommended six approaches to increase the impact of indicator reporting. These were: include users up-front in the process of defining indicators and report requirements; supplement broad scale reporting with in-depth or sectoral reports; provide a variety of information products suited to different audiences; provide information on solutions along with the facts on environmental trends and conditions; address environmental reporting needs of policy makers; and involve partnerships between agencies to pool resources and provide consistent messages.

The next SOE project for the ministry, which is a project reporting on the coast and marine environment of BC, was designed to address these recommendations. The project covers the marine, shoreline and estuarine environments and terrestrial ecosystems that affect, or are affected by, these environments. It is being done as a collaborative effort between two federal and two provincial ministries and two universities.

In an effort to have user needs drive indicator development, a consultation process was undertaken over a six-month period at the outset of the project to find out what potential users of the report wanted to see covered. Workshops were held for Ministry regional staff and stakeholders from outside government in four locations; a day-long facilitated workshop, using Chartier tools (see: www.managers-gestionnaires.gc.ca) was held with scientists and technical experts. In addition, survey and telephone interviews were conducted with municipal and regional staff and representatives of environmental and stewardship groups.

In terms of the consultation process, it was found that the richest input came from the workshops, which provided many detailed comments. It was also found that experts in a particular field tended to highlight the same issues as those that defined themselves as 'non-experts'. The results of the 'simple' consultation methods (surveys) lacked depth, but the repetition of issues by respondents was useful to indicate relative importance. A concern with the consultation process was that it tended to raise expectations that it might not be possible to meet about content, interpretation and timing of project deliverables. Also, the capacity of the volunteer sector to respond in depth is often limited.

The results of the consultation showed that audiences wanted the project to provide impartial reporting, to cover bad news as well as good, discuss baselines and thresholds, include information on solutions and predictions (e.g., what would happen if we continue as 'business-as-usual'). Specific issues of concern were largely in the following categories: ecosystems and biodiversity; fisheries and aquaculture; climate change; contaminants; and coastal development. There was also strong interest in learning about socio-economic consequences linked to environmental impacts and in reporting on community sustainability.

The feedback on reporting formats showed that, while web information is essential, hard copy products are still important to most people. Audiences also wanted access to local and regional data that could be used in communities and regional districts. For use with the general public, stakeholders wanted 'well digested' information, that was more accessible than the ministry's previous reports and web site. There were repeated comments on the value of providing 'brochure' information for use in public education.

As a result of the consultation process, approximately 40 indicators with supplementary metrics were chosen. The first phase of the project work is currently in progress—obtaining data for indicators (and surrogate indicators) and writing detailed technical papers. These cover each of the theme areas: Population Pressure; Impacts of Economic Activities; Health of Coastal Ecosystems; Biodiversity; Ecosystem Protection; Fisheries; Climate Change, Industrial Contaminants; and Stewardship. Once completed, the second part of the project is development of information products for public release (e.g., poster, web site, CD, etc.). A third, and later, phase of the project will provide recommendations and internal reports on gaps in monitoring and reporting that were found in the course of collecting the data.

Throughout this process, the practical realities have constrained and moderated the scope of work. These include: availability of funding, time and capacity of contributors, the fact that there are many competing, overlapping reporting projects, and political sensitivity about releasing environmental information. The project continues to highlight areas where more effort could improve SOE reporting. These include allocating resources to address gaps in research and monitoring, finding effective routes for communicating SOE information to policy makers and coordinating monitoring and reporting efforts at all scales.

Gilkeson, L. A. 2003. State of Environment Reporting: Past, Present and Future. Internal paper. BC Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. 23 pp.